

Gravity

—"You left me behind you, falling apart."

William

I woke to sunlight. Not the muted gray light I was used to—the pollution-filtered dawn that had been my companion through three years of hiding—but actual, genuine sunlight, streaming through my curtains in golden bands that painted stripes across my bedroom floor. I lay still for a moment, watching the dust motes dance in the beams, trying to remember the last time I'd noticed something so simple.

The exhibition was over. I had survived.

The realization settled into my body slowly, like water soaking into dry earth. I'd stood in front of hundreds of strangers. I'd given a speech about my grief, my mental health, my therapy. I'd let them see the most vulnerable pieces of me rendered in oil and canvas. And I was still here.

My body ached—the particular exhaustion that came from hours of sustained anxiety, from holding myself together through sheer willpower. My shoulders were tight, my jaw sore from unconscious clenching, my eyes gritty from a sleep that had been more collapse than rest. But beneath the physical discomfort was something else. Something lighter.

I felt alive.

Not the half-life I'd been existing in for years—the gray fog of isolation, the careful avoidance of anything that might require too much of me. This was different. This was presence. This was the particular clarity that came from having done something terrifying and discovering you could survive it.

I reached for my phone on the nightstand, then hesitated. The screen was lit with notifications—dozens of them, probably hundreds, the accumulated response of a world that had watched me emerge from hiding. Part of me wanted to ignore them, to protect the fragile peace of this morning for as long as possible. But that was the old William. The one who hid from everything. The one who let fear make his decisions.

I picked up the phone.

The messages were overwhelming. Congratulations flooded my inbox—from colleagues I hadn't spoken to in years, from gallery owners who wanted to discuss future exhibitions, from collectors expressing interest in pieces that hadn't even been put up for sale. My manager had sent a detailed summary of the evening's success: attendance numbers, press coverage, preliminary sales figures. Everything

she'd hoped for and more.

You did it, her final message read. Rest today. We'll talk tomorrow.

I scrolled through the congratulations without reading most of them—too many, too fast, too much to process before coffee. But certain names caught my eye. Old professors from art school. Fellow artists I'd lost touch with during my isolation. People I'd assumed had forgotten me, reaching out now that I'd become visible again.

Was that cynical? Or just realistic?

I couldn't decide, and the not-knowing felt okay. A year ago, I would have spiraled into paranoia—convinced they only cared about my fame, not me. Now, I could hold both possibilities at once: maybe some of them were opportunistic, and maybe some of them were genuine, and I didn't have to figure it out right this second.

Progress. This was progress.

Then I saw my father's name.

The message was brief: Congratulations on the exhibition. Your mother would have been proud.

I stared at it for a long time.

My father and I hadn't spoken properly in over a year. Our communication had devolved into logistics—brief texts about the estate, about his plans to sell my mother's house, about the business matters that connected us whether we wanted to be connected or not. Every exchange had been loaded with things unsaid: my anger at his remarriage, his frustration with my isolation, the grief we'd never learned to share. But this message was different. Simple. Almost kind.

Your mother would have been proud.

I thought about ignoring it. That's what I would have done before—let the silence speak for itself, let the distance grow until it became permanent. But something had shifted in me. Last night's speech, maybe. The words I'd said about not hiding anymore. The promise I'd made to myself to keep showing up.

I typed a response: Thank you. I hope so.

Then, before I could overthink it, I added: I'm working on getting the house back in order. I'll be in touch about the transfer. It was a boundary. Not an attack, not an accusation, just a clear statement of intent. I wanted my mother's house. I was prepared to do what was necessary to make that happen. And I was communicating directly instead of avoiding.

I sent the message and set down the phone.

One thing at a time, I reminded myself. One small victory at a time.

The apartment looked different this morning. I walked through the familiar rooms—the studio, the living room, the kitchen where I'd drunk thousands of cups of coffee in isolation—and saw them with new eyes. For three years, this space had been my entire world. The floor-to-ceiling windows that offered views of Bangkok had felt like the bars of an elegant prison, showing me everything I couldn't touch. But today, they were just windows.

I stood in front of the glass, looking out at the city spread below me. The morning traffic was building, cars crawling through streets I hadn't walked in years. The sky was clearer than usual—Bangkok's pollution lifted by overnight rain, revealing patches of blue I'd forgotten existed.

Somewhere out there, Est was waking up too. Processing last night. Looking at the photographs he'd taken. Maybe thinking about our conversation on the balcony.

I'm not closing the door.

The words still echoed in my mind, carrying more weight than three years of isolation. I thought about what he'd said—about learning to not lose himself in other people, about building his own stability instead of chasing storms. He'd been talking about me, I knew. I was the storm. The chaotic, unavailable person he'd been drawn to despite his better judgment. But I didn't want to be a storm anymore.

I wanted to be something else. Something that could exist alongside him without destroying either of us. Something that could grow.

The window in front of me had a small latch—the kind that allowed it to crack open a few inches, letting in fresh air while maintaining security. I'd never used it. For three years, I'd kept every window sealed, maintaining the climate-controlled environment that had become my sanctuary.

I reached out and turned the latch.

The window opened. Bangkok air flowed in—warm, humid, carrying the distant sounds of the city. Car horns. Voices. The particular white noise of millions of people living their lives just outside my glass walls. It was such a small thing. Such an insignificant act. But standing there, feeling the outside air touch my face for the first time in years, I understood something I hadn't before.

The prison had never been the apartment. The prison had been me. And I was finally, slowly, learning to open the doors.

My phone buzzed again. And again. And again. I made coffee before checking—black with sugar, poured into my mother's sunflower mug—and settled onto my sofa with the weight of the art world's judgment waiting in my inbox. My manager had compiled the reviews for me, a thoughtful gesture that meant I wouldn't have to search for them myself.

The first one I read was from the Bangkok Post.

"Absence & Light" represents a radical departure for Jakrapatr, whose earlier work was characterized by controlled precision and masterful technique. Here, control has been abandoned—or perhaps destroyed—replaced by something rawer, more urgent, more honest. Whether this represents artistic evolution or self-indulgent regression depends largely on what one seeks from art.

I read the words twice, letting them settle. Self-indulgent regression. The phrase stung, but it didn't devastate me. A year ago, it would have sent me spiraling into the particular darkness that criticism always triggered—the conviction that I was worthless, that my work was worthless, that anyone who praised me was simply being polite. Now, I could see it for what it was: one opinion among many, one perspective in a world full of perspectives.

The next review was kinder.

"What makes 'Absence & Light' extraordinary is not its technical execution—though that remains impressive—but its willingness to be ugly. Jakrapatr's grief is not aestheticized or contained. It sprawls across canvases, demanding to be witnessed in all its chaos. This is art as exorcism, and the result is the most genuine work we've seen from a Thai artist in years."

Better. But I noticed something interesting: the praise didn't fix anything either. I didn't feel suddenly healed, suddenly worthy, suddenly justified in all my choices. The validation was pleasant, but it was still external. Still dependent on someone else's judgment.

The praise doesn't fix me, I thought. The criticism doesn't destroy me.

The realization was new. Important.

Let go of what you can't control.

Dr. Chaisri's voice, echoing from months of sessions. I was finally starting to understand what she meant.

I kept reading. Mixed opinions flowed past my eyes—some critics loved the chaos pieces, others found them self-indulgent; some were moved by my mother's portrait, others found it sentimental; the unfinished portrait of Est sparked particular

debate, with several reviewers speculating about its subject and meaning.

"The half-rendered face in the alcove represents the exhibition's most enigmatic piece. Who is this figure, caught forever between completion and abandonment? Jakrapatr offers no explanation, and perhaps that silence is the point."

They didn't know it was Est. Couldn't know, unless someone told them. The ambiguity was protective—a veil between my private life and public consumption. But I wondered what Est thought, reading these reviews. Whether he recognized himself in their descriptions. Whether he understood why I'd left him unfinished.

My phone buzzed with a message from Lego.

On my way. Bringing coffee and questions. Don't you dare disappear into that bedroom before I get there.

I smiled despite myself. Lego knew me too well—knew my tendency to retreat, to hide, to convince myself that isolation was easier than connection. He'd spent three years fighting that tendency, and he wasn't about to stop now.

I sent back a single emoji: a thumbs up.

Then I returned to the reviews.

The sales figures were surprising.

My manager had included a preliminary report: several pieces had sold during the opening night, with offers pending on others. The centerpiece—my mother's portrait—had generated multiple competing bids, though I'd already decided not to sell it. Some things weren't meant to be owned by strangers. But the chaos pieces were selling. The raw, violent paintings I'd created during my worst periods—slashes of color that represented rage and grief and the particular desperation of a man trying to process emotions too big to contain. People wanted to own them.

I didn't know how to feel about that.

Was there something voyeuristic about it? Collectors paying money to hang someone else's breakdown on their walls? Or was it something more generous—a recognition that pain could be transformed into beauty, that vulnerability had value, that art was meant to be witnessed?

Both, probably. Everything was both.

I set down the phone and looked at my coffee cup—my mother's sunflower mug, chipped and worn from years of use. She would have understood the complexity. She'd been an artist herself in her own way, building a flower shop from nothing,

creating arrangements that brought beauty into people's ordinary lives. She'd known that art was never just one thing, that meaning was always multiple, that the same piece could be exploitation and healing simultaneously.

I miss you, I thought. I wish you could see what I made.

But maybe she could. Maybe she'd been watching all along, from wherever the dead watched from. The thought was probably sentimental, probably the kind of comforting fiction that people told themselves to manage grief. But it didn't feel untrue. It felt like possibility.

The buzzer rang. Lego was here.

Lego arrived carrying two cups of coffee from the expensive café downstairs—the one I'd never visited, the one that existed in a building I'd lived in for years without ever entering.

"I know you already made coffee," he said, pushing past me into the apartment with his usual energy, "but this is celebration coffee. It's different."

"How is it different?"

"It's more expensive." He grinned, pressing one of the cups into my hands. "And it's from the outside world, which means it counts as you continuing to participate in society."

I took the coffee. It was oat milk something, far too sweet for my taste, but I drank it anyway because Lego had brought it and that mattered more than flavor.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, settling onto my sofa with the ease of someone who had spent countless hours in this apartment. His legs curled beneath him, his phone already set aside, his full attention focused on me. "And I want the real answer, not the one you think I want to hear."

I considered the question. Considered all the possible answers—the deflections, the minimizations, the particular ways I'd learned to hide even from people who loved me.

"Tired," I said finally. "But... alive. Really alive."

The words surprised me as they came out. But they were true. For the first time in years, I felt genuinely present in my own life. Not just surviving. Not just managing. Living.

Lego's expression softened. "That's what I was hoping you'd say."

"The reviews are mixed."

"I know. I read them on the way over." He waved a dismissive hand. "Critics are critics. Half of them are failed artists who couldn't make anything so they write about people who can. The ones who matter—the ones who actually understand what you were doing—those reviews are incredible, P'Will."

"I know." I sat down beside him, cradling my too-sweet coffee. "It's strange, though. The praise doesn't... it doesn't fix anything. And the criticism doesn't break me either. It's all just—external. Separate from what actually matters."

"Which is?"

"That I made something true. That I showed up to stand beside it." I met his eyes. "That I survived."

Lego reached over and squeezed my hand. His fingers were warm, his grip firm and grounding.

"You know what I keep thinking about?" he said. "That moment in your speech—the part about the person who saw you before you could see yourself. The way the whole room went quiet."

My heart clenched. "Did he hear it? Est?"

"He was there, wasn't he? He was photographing."

"I mean—did he hear it? Did he understand?"

Lego's expression was complicated—sympathy and something else, something more guarded.

"I think he understood," he said carefully. "But understanding isn't the same as—I don't know. Forgiving? Trusting? He's been through his own thing, P'Will. You know that."

"I know."

"And rushing him won't help."

"I know that too."

We sat in silence for a moment, the weight of everything unsaid filling the space between us.

"I talked to him," I admitted. "Last night. On the balcony."

Lego's eyes widened. "You did? What happened?"

"He said he's not closing the door. But he's not walking through it yet either." I stared into my coffee cup, watching the liquid swirl. "He's been working on himself."

Learning to not lose himself in—in people like me."

"People like you?"

"Storms." The word came out bitter. "That's what his therapist called them, apparently. People who are too chaotic, too unavailable, too damaged. People who take more than they give."

Lego's hand tightened on mine. "That's not who you are anymore."

"Isn't it?"

"No." His voice was firm. "P'Will, look at me."

I looked.

"You are not the person you were six months ago. Or a year ago. Or three years ago. You've done the work. You've shown up to therapy even when it hurt. You've taken your medication even when you hated how it made you feel. You've let people in even when every instinct screamed at you to hide." His eyes were fierce. "That's not storm behavior. That's survival. That's growth."

"Est doesn't know that yet."

"Then show him." Lego's voice softened. "Not through grand gestures. Through consistency. Through showing up, again and again, proving that you can be trusted. That's what you've been doing with me for months. It's what you can do with him too."

The words settled into my chest, warm and steady.

"I don't know if it will be enough." I said quietly.

"Maybe it won't be. Maybe he'll decide that what you had was too broken to fix. But at least you'll know you tried. At least you'll know you became the person you wanted to become, regardless of whether he could see it."

I thought about that. About the difference between earning someone's love and becoming worthy of love in general. About the work I'd been doing not for Est's approval, but for my own healing.

"I need to tell you something," I said. "About what comes next."

Lego set down, giving me his full attention. "What is it?"

"I've been hiding for too long. In this apartment, in my routines, in the particular safety of not engaging with the world. The exhibition was a start, but it can't be the ending." I met his eyes. "I want more. More life. More connection. More of everything I've been too afraid to pursue."

"P'Will—"

"You've been taking care of me for three years. Flowers every Wednesday. Visits when I couldn't leave. Patience when I pushed you away." I felt my voice thicken. "But I don't want to be someone who needs to be taken care of anymore. I want to be someone who can show up for you too. Who can visit your apartment instead of just receiving visits. Who can be a real friend instead of just—a responsibility."

Lego's eyes were shining. "You've always been a real friend. Even at your worst."

"I want to be better than my worst. I want to deserve the loyalty you've given me."

We sat in the quiet for a moment, letting the words settle. Then Lego reached out and took my hand—the same gesture I'd shared with Est last night, the particular intimacy of touch after so long without it.

"You already deserve it," he said. "But I'm excited to see what 'better' looks like."

In the afternoon, I did something I hadn't done in years.

I left my apartment alone.

Not with Lego beside me, not with my manager running interference, not with a scheduled appointment giving me structure and purpose. Just me, stepping out of my building, hailing a taxi, existing in the world like a normal person.

The taxi driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror but didn't comment on my nervous energy. Bangkok taxi drivers had seen everything; one anxious artist was nothing remarkable. I gave him the address—one I knew by heart, one I hadn't visited in three years—and watched the city flow past my window.

The flower shop where Lego worked was near the river, in a part of Bangkok that had resisted the relentless march of development. The buildings here were older, warmer, their facades softened by time and the particular humidity that made everything in this city slightly blurred around the edges.

I'd been to this shop hundreds of times as a child. It had belonged to my mother's friend, then to my mother herself when the friend retired, and now to a distant cousin who'd taken over after my mother's death. Lego had started working there two years ago—a coincidence that felt like fate, as if my mother was still somehow arranging things from wherever she'd gone.

The taxi stopped. I paid and stepped out onto familiar sidewalk.

The shop looked exactly as I remembered. Flowers spilled from the entrance in organized chaos—roses and orchids and lilies and dozens of species I still couldn't

name, arranged in the particular style my mother had developed over decades of practice. The windows were clean, the awning freshly painted, the whole space radiating the particular warmth that had always made this place feel like home.

I stood outside for a moment, just breathing it in. The scent of flowers mixed with Bangkok's ever-present exhaust, creating a combination that immediately transported me back to childhood. To afternoons spent helping my mother arrange bouquets. To the patient way she'd tried to teach me the names of things I was too distracted to learn.

I'm learning now, I thought. Too late, but I'm learning.

The door chimed when I pushed it open. The interior was cooler, the air conditioning working hard against the afternoon heat. Buckets of flowers lined the walls, their colors creating a living tapestry that shifted and changed with each new shipment. The counter was near the back, and behind it—

Khun Somying looked up.

She was older now, her hair more gray than black, her face carrying the particular lines that came from decades of early mornings and physical labor. But her eyes were the same—warm and knowing, the eyes of someone who had watched me grow up, who had been there for every significant moment of my childhood.

"William." Her voice cracked on my name. "Is that really you?"

"Khun Somying." I crossed the shop, stopping at the counter, suddenly unsure what to do with my hands. "I'm—I should have come sooner. I should have—"

"Shh." She came around the counter and pulled me into a hug before I could finish apologizing. She smelled like flowers and green things, exactly as she always had. "You're here now. That's what matters."

I let myself be held. Let the familiarity of her embrace wash over me, carrying all the memories of this place—my mother's laughter, the rustle of tissue paper, the particular satisfaction of a perfectly arranged bouquet.

"I saw the coverage of your exhibition," she said when she finally released me. "On the news this morning. They showed photos of your mother's portrait."

"You did?"

"I cried." She smiled, wiping at her eyes with the edge of her apron. "She would have been so proud, William. So proud of the man you've become."

The words hit me harder than any review. Here was someone who had actually known my mother, who had watched me grow up, who could speak to her pride with authority. Not a stranger speculating about what the dead might feel, but a witness

to the life she'd actually lived.

"I'm trying," I said, my voice rough. "To be someone she'd be proud of."

"You already are." Khun Somying reached up and touched my face—a maternal gesture that made my throat tighten. "She always knew you would be. Even when you were difficult, even when you were lost in your own head and couldn't see what she saw—she knew."

I didn't know what to say. The grief rose up, familiar and heavy, but it felt different now. Less like drowning, more like... honoring. Carrying her memory forward instead of being crushed by it.

"I'd like to buy some flowers," I said finally. "White oleanders, if you have them."

Khun Somying's eyebrows rose. "White oleanders? Those are unusual. Most people want roses or orchids."

"They're for Lego. His favorites."

Understanding softened her expression. "Ah. Of course. He mentioned you two had reconnected." She moved toward a bucket near the window, where delicate white blooms clustered together. "He talks about you, you know. All the time. How proud he is of the work you've been doing. How much you've changed."

"He's the one who kept me alive," I admitted. "The flowers he brought me every Wednesday—I don't think I would have survived without them."

Khun Somying selected several perfect stems, handling them with the particular care that came from decades of practice. "Your mother used to say that about flowers, you know. That they were proof of persistence. They keep blooming, season after season, regardless of whether anyone's watching. They don't need an audience to be beautiful."

"I remember."

"You were never very good at learning their names." She smiled, beginning to wrap the bouquet in tissue paper. "Always too distracted, too busy thinking about your paintings. But she didn't mind. She knew you'd find your own way eventually."

The oleanders were beautiful—pure white petals with a faint blush of pink at the center, delicate and deadly in equal measure. I thought about why Lego loved them. The contradiction of it. Something that could be both gorgeous and poisonous, depending on how you approached it.

Maybe that's what all love was like. Beautiful and dangerous. Worth the risk, despite the potential for harm.

"How much?" I asked, reaching for my wallet.

Khun Somying waved the question away. "No charge. For you, never."

"I can't—"

"You can, and you will." Her voice was firm. "Your mother built this shop. It exists because of her. The least I can do is give her son some flowers when he finally comes home."

The word home settled into my chest like a key turning in a lock. I'd spent so long feeling like I didn't belong anywhere—not in my father's new life, not in the art world that had commodified my grief, not even in my own apartment. But this shop, these flowers, this woman who remembered my mother—this was home too. This was still here, waiting for me.

"Thank you," I said, taking the bouquet. "For everything. For keeping this place alive."

"Come back soon." She squeezed my hand. "Don't disappear for another three years."

"I won't." And this time, I meant it. "I promise."

The taxi ride to Lego's apartment felt different than the ride to the flower shop. Shorter, somehow. Less terrifying. Maybe because I'd already survived the harder thing—stepping into the world alone, facing the memories of my mother, receiving kindness from someone who'd known me before I became the person I'd been trying to escape.

I held the oleanders carefully, protecting them from the jostling of Bangkok traffic. Their scent filled the small space of the taxi, sweet and slightly dangerous. Lego would love them. He'd probably cry, because Lego cried easily, but they'd be good tears. Happy tears.

As we drove, I made a mental list.

Things to do:

1. Get a driver's license.

It had been years since I'd driven—since before the isolation, before my mother's death. The anxiety around cars had become tangled with all my other anxieties, making the idea of sitting behind a wheel seem impossible. But other things had seemed impossible too, and I'd done them. I'd given a speech. I'd opened a window. I'd left my apartment alone. A driver's license was just another window to open.

2. Visit the house.

My mother's house. The one my father had been threatening to sell, the one that had been sitting empty since her death. I needed to see it. Needed to decide what to do with it. Needed to face whatever feelings waited for me in those rooms.

3. Build a life.

Not just survive. Not just manage. Actually live. Go to restaurants. Visit galleries. Meet people. Do all the ordinary things that ordinary people did, the things I'd convinced myself were impossible for someone as broken as me.

They weren't impossible. I knew that now. They were just difficult. And difficult was something I could handle.

The taxi stopped outside Lego's building. I paid, gathered my flowers, and walked toward the entrance. The stairs felt easier today. My body remembered the climb from yesterday, recognized the particular rhythm of these steps. Each floor passed without incident—no panic, no dissociation, just the simple physical act of moving through space.

I knocked on Lego's door.

It flew open almost immediately, and I was greeted by the sight of Lego on his phone, mid-conversation, his face lighting up when he saw me.

"P'William!" He launched himself forward, wrapping me in a hug that nearly crushed the flowers between us. "You came! I didn't think you'd actually—you're here! Hold on—" He spoke into his phone: "P'Hong, I have to go, my best friend just showed up with flowers, I'll call you later, bye!" He hung up and stepped back, his eyes going wide as he took in the bouquet. "Are those—"

"White oleanders." I held them out, feeling suddenly shy. "I went to the flower shop. Khun Somying sends her love."

Lego's face went through a complicated series of emotions—surprise, then understanding, then something softer that made his eyes glisten.

"You went to the shop," he said. "By yourself?"

"By myself."

"P'Will—" His voice cracked. "You went outside. Alone. To buy me flowers."

"They're your favorites, aren't they?"

"How did you—" He stopped, laughed, wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Of course you know. You've been paying attention."

"I'm trying to pay attention now. To everything I missed before."

Lego took the flowers with the reverent care of someone receiving something precious. His face, without makeup today, showed every emotion clearly—the moles and freckles usually hidden beneath foundation, the particular expressiveness that no amount of concealer could disguise.

He was wearing a jumpsuit with shorts, the kind of casual outfit I'd never seen him in before. His feet were bare except for platform Crocs decorated with colorful clips featuring cartoon characters I didn't recognize. His hair was held back by a simple black headband, revealing the full shape of his face. He looked young. Happy. Real in a way that his polished appearance sometimes obscured.

"Come in, come in." He stepped aside, clutching the flowers to his chest. "I made cookies. And tea. And I want to hear everything about your day."

I stepped over the threshold into his apartment, into the chaos of stuffed animals and pastel colors, and felt something settle in my chest.

This was what life could be. Small kindnesses. Unexpected beauty. The particular grace of showing up for people and having them show up for you.

I was finally learning to accept it.

Lego's apartment was even more chaotic than I remembered. New stuffed animals had appeared since yesterday—or maybe I just hadn't noticed them, too focused on preparing for the exhibition to take in the details. They covered every surface: bears and rabbits and creatures I couldn't identify, their button eyes watching as I settled onto the sofa.

"Make yourself comfortable," Lego called from the kitchen. "The kettle's almost done."

I looked around, trying to find a space that wasn't occupied by a plushie. Eventually, I moved a particularly large bear to the side and sat down, feeling its soft fur brush against my arm.

The flowers were already in a vase—Lego had produced one immediately, filling it with water and arranging the oleanders with practiced care. They sat on his small dining table now, their white petals catching the afternoon light.

"I can't believe you went to the shop," Lego said, emerging from the kitchen with a tray. "Khun Somying must have been so surprised."

"She cried."

"She always cries. She's the biggest softie in Bangkok." He set the tray on the coffee table, revealing its contents: a pot of fragrant tea and several plates of cookies. "I made these this morning. Couldn't sleep, so I baked."

The cookies were works of art. Small shapes cut with careful precision—bunnies and stars and hearts—decorated with chocolate and vanilla frosting. Beside them sat a plate of simpler cookies, round and studded with chocolate chips, their surface crackled in the particular way that indicated perfect texture.

"These are beautiful." I said, picking up one of the bunny cookies.

"The chocolate chip ones are your mother's recipe." Lego's voice was soft. "I hope that's okay. I found it in one of her old notebooks, the ones you gave me after—after."

I stared at the cookies. The chocolate chip ones. My mother's recipe. I'd forgotten that I'd given Lego her notebooks. In the worst of my grief, I'd wanted them out of my apartment—too painful to look at, too loaded with memories I couldn't process. Lego had taken them without question, had kept them safe for me until I was ready.

"She used to make these every Sunday," I said, my voice rough. "When I was young. I'd help her measure the chocolate chips, and she'd let me eat half of them before they made it into the bowl."

"I know." Lego settled beside me on the sofa, tucking his legs beneath him. "She wrote about it. About how you were always stealing ingredients, how she had to double the recipe just to compensate."

I picked up one of the chocolate chip cookies. It looked exactly right—the same color, the same texture, the same slight irregularity that came from hand-mixing. I took a bite.

The taste was an explosion of memory. Suddenly I was seven years old, standing in my mother's kitchen, flour on my hands and chocolate on my face. She was laughing at something I'd said, her hair falling out of its braid, the whole room warm with the scent of baking. I closed my eyes against the sudden sting of tears.

"P'Will?" Lego's hand found my arm. "Are you okay?"

"It tastes exactly the same." My voice came out broken. "How did you—"

"Her recipe was very detailed. She wrote notes in the margins about what worked and what didn't. The secret is browning the butter first, apparently. She figured that out after years of experimentation."

I took another bite, letting the flavor wash over me. Sweet and comforting, with that particular depth that came from browned butter and good chocolate. The taste of Sunday mornings. The taste of home.

"Thank you," I managed. "For keeping the notebooks. For making these."

"Thank you for giving them to me." Lego's hand squeezed my arm. "I know it was hard. I know you were in pain. But letting me hold them—that meant something to me. It meant you trusted me with her memory."

I looked at him—really looked, seeing past the surface to the person underneath. Lego, who had been abandoned by his own parents. Who had built himself a fortress of soft things to keep the world's hardness at bay. Who had chosen to love me, to stay with me, to bring me flowers every Wednesday for three years even when I couldn't tell him what the flowers meant.

"I want to go to the house." I said.

Lego's eyebrows rose. "Your mother's house?"

"My father said—" I stopped, organizing my thoughts. "He said that if I could keep my adult life afloat, he'd give me my share. Let me be the full owner. I want to take him up on it."

"Now? Today?"

"Today." The word came out with more certainty than I felt. "I need to see it. I need to—I don't know. Take it back. Start fixing what got broken."

Lego studied my face, looking for something. Whatever he found seemed to satisfy him, because he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Then let's do it."

One step at a time. One impossible thing after another.

I was getting my life back.

The phone call was easier than I expected. My father answered on the third ring, his voice carrying the particular formality he used with everyone—family and strangers alike. "William. I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon."

"I want to discuss the house." Direct. Clear. The boundaries I'd been practicing with Dr. Chaisri. "You said if I could prove I was managing my life, you'd transfer your share to me."

A pause. "The exhibition was last night."

"Yes."

"And this morning, you want to talk business."

"I want to talk about Mae's house." Using the Thai word for mother felt deliberate—a reminder that this was personal, not just financial. "I'm ready to take responsibility for it."

Another pause, longer this time. I could hear movement in the background—the particular sounds of a home with multiple people in it, the life my father had built without me.

"Meet me there in an hour," he said finally. "I'll bring the paperwork."

"I'll be there."

He hung up without saying goodbye. That was fine. We didn't need goodbyes. We just needed clarity.

Lego was watching me with wide eyes. "You're really doing this."

"I'm really doing this."

"I'm coming with you."

"I was hoping you would."

The house was in the old part of Bangkok, in a neighborhood that had somehow resisted the relentless march of development. The streets here were narrower, the buildings older, the whole area carrying a sense of history that the newer districts lacked.

The taxi dropped us at the corner, and I stood for a moment, looking at the place where I'd grown up.

From the outside, it looked almost the same. The facade was weathered but intact, the traditional Thai architecture still beautiful despite years of neglect. The windows were dark, the curtains drawn, but the structure seemed solid. The garden, though—the garden was a disaster.

What had once been my mother's pride and joy was now a tangle of overgrowth and decay. Weeds had taken over the flower beds. The jasmine that used to climb the front wall had become a wild, unruly mass. The small pond where she'd kept fish was green with algae, its surface broken only by the occasional mosquito.

I felt Lego's hand slip into mine.

"It can be fixed," he said quietly. "All of this can be fixed."

"I know."

We walked up the path together, stepping over broken tiles that had once been perfectly maintained. The door was locked, but I had the key—had always had the key, had just never been able to bring myself to use it.

The lock turned. The door opened.

The smell hit me first. Dust and stillness, the particular scent of a house that had been closed up for too long. Beneath it, barely detectable, the ghost of something familiar—my mother's perfume, maybe, or the particular combination of cooking smells that had always filled this space.

The interior was worse than I'd expected.

"She would hate seeing it like this."

"She would understand. And she would be proud that you're here to fix it."

All the furniture was covered with white sheets, transforming the familiar shapes into ghostly mounds. A thick layer of dust coated every surface, visible even in the dim light filtering through the drawn curtains. When I flipped the light switch, nothing happened—the electricity had been cut off, another sign of neglect.

"The dining room," Lego said, pointing toward a dark stain spreading across the ceiling. "Water damage. Probably from the monsoons."

"I see it."

We walked through the house slowly, taking inventory of the damage. The water had leaked through in several places, leaving stains and, in one corner, actual mold. The wood floors had warped near the windows where rain had gotten in. The kitchen was thick with dust, the appliances silent and cold. But beneath the neglect, beneath the decay, I could still see my mother's house.

The tile pattern she'd chosen for the entryway, still beautiful despite the grime. The built-in shelves where she'd displayed her favorite books, still standing though their contents had been packed away. The window seat where I'd sat as a child, reading while she worked in the garden.

"It's still here," I said, my voice rough. "Under all of this. It's still here."

"Of course it is." Lego squeezed my hand. "Houses don't forget. They just wait."

We made our way to the back door, which opened onto the garden. What had once been a carefully designed space—winding paths, strategic plantings, the pond as a centerpiece—was now a jungle of neglect. But when I stepped outside, when I breathed in the smell of green things growing wild, I could imagine what it had been. What it could be again.

Lego followed me outside. I watched him walk through the overgrown space, his fingers brushing against leaves and stems, and suddenly I understood something I should have realized years ago. This garden was why he'd spent years bringing me flowers, why he'd worked at my mother's shop, why he'd devoted himself to beauty in the particular form of growing things.

My mother had taught him this. Had given him this gift, this connection to the world of plants and flowers. And now he was standing in her abandoned garden, looking at everything that had been lost.

The sound of a car pulling up made me turn.

My father had arrived.

He looked older than I remembered. It had only been a year since I'd seen him in person, but the time had left its mark. His hair was grayer, his posture more stooped, his face carrying lines that hadn't been there before. He was wearing expensive casual clothes—the uniform of a man who no longer needed to impress anyone with his success. Behind him, stepping out of the passenger side of the car, was his wife.

Natalie was younger than him by fifteen years—closer to my age than his—with blonde hair and European features that marked her as the foreigner she was. She wore a white floral dress with blue flowers, the kind of summery thing that tourists favored, and her hand rested on her stomach.

On the small, visible curve of her stomach. She was pregnant.

I felt Lego stiffen beside me, his hand tightening on mine. He'd noticed too. My father didn't introduce her. Didn't mention the pregnancy. Just walked up to where I stood in the overgrown garden and held out a folder.

"The paperwork," he said. "I had my lawyer draw it up last week. I was going to send it after the exhibition, but since you're here—"

"Thank you." I took the folder. "For doing this."

"It's what your mother would have wanted." His voice carried something I couldn't quite identify—regret, maybe, or the particular weight of unspoken things. "The house should be yours."

I opened the folder and glanced at the documents inside. Legal language, dense and formal, transferring full ownership of the property to me. My father's signature was already at the bottom of each page, waiting only for mine.

"There are repairs needed," my father said, glancing at the visible decay. "The roof, especially. And the water damage in the dining room will require professional attention."

"I'll handle it."

"I can recommend contractors—"

"I'll handle it." The words came out sharper than I intended. "I appreciate the offer, but this is something I need to do myself." A flash of something in my father's eyes—hurt, maybe, or frustration. But he nodded.

"Of course." He stepped back, putting distance between us. "The utilities are in your name now. You'll just need to call and have them reconnected."

"Thank you."

We stood in awkward silence for a moment. Behind my father, Natalie shifted her weight, her hand still resting on her stomach. I wondered if the baby was a boy or a girl. Wondered if I would have a sibling I'd never know. But I didn't ask. If my father wanted to include me in that part of his life, he would have mentioned it. His silence was answer enough.

"The exhibition was impressive," my father said finally. "Your mother's portrait especially. The critics are calling it your best work."

"Thank you."

"She would have been there, you know. Front row. Wearing something too bright." A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "She always wore the wrong thing to your openings. Said artists' events were too serious and needed color."

It was the most personal thing he'd said to me in years. The most human. I felt something crack in my chest—not anger, not grief, just the particular ache of loss. Of all the things that might have been different, if we'd been different kinds of people.

"I know," I said. "I thought about that. During the speech."

"She would have cried."

"She always cried."

Another silence. But this one felt different—less loaded, more like the natural pause between people who didn't quite know how to talk to each other but were trying anyway.

"I should go," my father said finally. "Natalie has an appointment."

"Of course."

He turned to leave, then paused. Looked back at me.

"William." His voice was quieter now. "I know I haven't been—I know things between us have been—" He stopped, struggling for words. "I'm glad you're doing better. I'm glad you're taking care of yourself."

It wasn't an apology. Wasn't an explanation. But it was more than he'd given me in years.

"Thank you," I said. "For the house. For—everything."

He nodded once, then walked back to his car. Natalie gave me a small wave—uncertain, not unfriendly—before sliding into the passenger seat. The engine started, and then they were gone. I stood in my mother's garden, holding the folder that made me the owner of her house, and let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

Lego found me in the garden, standing in front of what had once been my mother's rose bed. The roses were still there—wild now, untended, their blooms small and scattered among the thorns. But they were alive. They'd survived three years of neglect, and they were still putting out flowers.

"Hey," Lego said softly, coming to stand beside me. "How are you doing?"

I considered the question. Considered all the things I was feeling—the grief and the relief, the anger and the hope, the particular weight of standing in a place that held so many memories.

"I'm okay," I said finally. "Better than okay, maybe."

"Your father—"

"Is my father. He's never going to be what I need him to be. But he gave me the house, and that's—" I paused, searching for the right word. "That's enough. For now."

Lego's hand found mine again. We stood together, looking at the wild garden, at the house that waited behind us with all its damage and all its potential.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I'm thinking about how much work this is going to be." I gestured at the overgrown beds, the damaged roof, the accumulated decay of years of neglect. "The repairs alone will take months. And the garden—"

"The garden I can help with." Lego's voice was firm. "I know flowers, remember? And I'm between dance projects right now. I've got time."

"You have your knee to worry about."

"Gardening isn't dancing. It's gentle. Good for my recovery, actually—physical therapy without the pressure." He squeezed my hand. "Let me help, P'Will. Let me be part of bringing this place back to life."

I looked at him—at this person who had given me so much, who had stayed when everyone else left, who was now offering to help rebuild my mother's legacy.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

His face lit up. "Really?"

"On one condition."

"What?"

"You let me pay you. Actual wages, not just favors. This is a job, and you deserve to be compensated."

Lego started to argue, then stopped. Considered.

"Fine," he said finally. "But I'm choosing which flowers we plant. No arguments."

"Deal."

We shook on it, our hands clasped in the middle of my mother's garden, surrounded by roses that had somehow survived.

The afternoon was fading by the time we left the house. I'd spent an hour walking through the rooms, making notes on my phone about repairs needed, taking photographs to show contractors, beginning the process of inventory that would occupy me for weeks. The electricity company had been called; they'd reconnect service within the week. A locksmith was scheduled to change the old locks. The bones of a plan were forming.

Lego had wandered the garden, identifying plants, pulling up the worst of the weeds, beginning his own assessment of what could be saved and what needed to be replaced. By the time I found him, his hands were dirty and his face was bright with excitement.

"The jasmine is salvageable," he reported. "And the orchids in the back—I can't believe they survived. They're tough, those ones. And look—" He pulled me toward a corner I hadn't noticed. "Frangipani. Your mother's favorite, right?"

The tree was there, hidden behind a tangle of overgrowth—smaller than I remembered, but alive, its branches reaching toward the light. A few white blossoms dotted its crown, their scent faint but unmistakable.

"She planted that when I was born," I said, my voice rough. "Said it would grow up with me."

"It's still growing." Lego touched one of the blossoms gently. "It's been waiting for you to come back."

I didn't know if trees could wait. Didn't know if plants had that kind of awareness, that kind of loyalty. But standing there, looking at the frangipani that had witnessed my entire life, I wanted to believe it was true.

"We should go," I said finally. "It's getting late."

"One more thing." Lego pulled out his phone. "Stand there. By the tree."

"Why?"

"Because this is important, and we should document it. Your therapist said that, remember? Mark the milestones so you can see how far you've come."

I stood by the frangipani while Lego took photographs—of me, of the tree, of the garden that would soon be reborn. Then I took his phone and photographed him, standing in the overgrown flower beds with dirt on his hands and joy on his face.

Evidence of this day. Evidence of hope.

The taxi back to my apartment was quiet. Lego had decided to go home—his knee was aching, and he needed rest—so I was alone with my thoughts, watching Bangkok flow past my window. The city looked different now. Less threatening. More full of possibility.

I'd done impossible things today. Left my apartment alone. Visited my mother's flower shop. Confronted my father. Reclaimed my mother's house. Each one had seemed insurmountable until I did it, and then it was just—done. Just another thing I'd survived.

One thing at a time, I reminded myself. One small victory at a time.

The taxi stopped outside my building. I paid and walked into the lobby, past the security guard who nodded his recognition, toward the elevator that would carry me home. But I didn't feel the usual relief at returning to my sanctuary. The apartment waited for me, comfortable and familiar, but it wasn't the only place I belonged anymore. I had other places now. Other homes.

The flower shop where Khun Somying remembered my mother.

Lego's apartment with its fortress of softness.

My mother's house, waiting to be restored.

And maybe—maybe—somewhere in the future, a place that included Est. Not today. Not yet. But someday. If I kept showing up. If I kept trying.

I'm not closing the door.

I carried his words with me as I stepped into the elevator. Held them close as I rode up to my apartment. Let them settle into my chest as I unlocked my door and stepped into the space I'd hidden in for three years.

The apartment looked the same as always. But I was different. I walked to the window—the one I'd opened that morning, letting Bangkok's air touch my face for the first time in years—and looked out at the city.

Tomorrow, I would start the work of restoration. Calling contractors. Ordering supplies. Beginning the long process of bringing my mother's house back to life.

Tomorrow, I would make another list. More things to accomplish. More windows to open. More walls to tear down.

Tomorrow, I would keep trying.

But tonight, I stood at my window and watched the lights of Bangkok flicker to life, and I let myself feel something I hadn't felt in years.

Hope.

Not the desperate, grasping hope that had sometimes kept me alive during the worst of my isolation. Something quieter. More sustainable. The kind of hope that came from having done hard things and survived them. The kind that came from knowing you could do them again.

I thought about Est. About his resurrection plant that had learned to turn green again. About his careful, patient work of becoming someone new.

I was becoming someone new too. Someone who left his apartment alone. Someone who bought flowers for the people he loved. Someone who reclaimed houses and opened windows and kept showing up, day after day, despite the fear.

The city glittered below me, full of lives I would never know, full of stories I would never hear. But I was part of it now. Connected, however tenuously, to the world I'd been hiding from.

My mother would have been proud.

I whispered the words into the quiet of my apartment, into the night air flowing through my open window, into the space where her absence lived alongside the light I was learning to find.

"I'm trying, Mae. I'm going to keep trying."

The city didn't answer. It never did. But the silence felt different now.

It felt like possibility.

It felt like home.